



## Developing independence with cutlery

Learning to self-feed requires a complex range of skills that develop over time. It's common for children to find it hard to learn to use cutlery and to stay clean whilst eating. Encourage your child to practice regularly and give them lots of praise.

It is important to make sure that the knife, fork and spoon are appropriate for your child's age and developmental stage. If holding cutlery is difficult, your child can use thicker cutlery such as ergonomic cutlery. The thicker cutlery will be easier for your child to hold.



### Activity ideas to support with developing self-feeding skills (pre skills):

- Like any skill, encourage practicing their cutlery skills. Repetition is required. The first step is to encourage them to play with the cutlery to get used to them.
- Try to do these activities when your child is not hungry.
- Use the knife and fork during supervised play time - they could be cutting playdough.
- Scoop with a spoon when playing - this could be in sensory play, such as sand, water, dried beans etc.
- To learn to take food off their fork, encourage them to practice scooping dried peas, rice or balls of playdough using cutlery and transferring them into another container. This will help to develop their motor control, along with hand-eye coordination.
- Check the cutlery is the correct size for your child. If your child is struggling to hold the cutlery try using thicker cutlery or easy grip cutlery. Where necessary ask an OT for support and advice.
- You can try guiding your child's hands to their mouth whilst they are holding the cutlery, to show them the required motor action. This is called hand-over-hand support, however should never be forced.
- Use a non-slip mat under your child's plate to prevent it moving around on the table.
- You can read story books about eating and drinking, play tea party games or sing songs about eating and mealtimes.
- Encourage your child to sit in a good sitting position at the table, with feet flat on the floor or on a box/step, as this supports the posture required.
- Any hand strengthening activities will support cutlery use, such as moulding playdough, cutting cardboard, crumpling newspaper balls, construction toys.

### Activity ideas to support development with self-feeding (next steps):

Keep practicing the cutlery skills with your child whilst they are not hungry. You can keep using playdough and pretend to make cakes, pizza or sausages, which they can roll, mould and cut.

You can move onto soft foods for them to cut, such as ham or cheese. When your child is learning to use cutlery, they will struggle to cut tougher foods like meat or vegetables. Encourage them to prod with a fork and saw with a knife under your supervision, however this will take some time to develop.

You can start with foods like:

- Thick yogurt
- Mashed potatoes
- Bananas
- Cooked vegetables like peas and carrots
- Fish fingers or ham

A way to encourage your child to use their cutlery is to cut the food on half of their plate. This means they don't have to cut as much. As they become more confident and as their skills progress, you can cut up less food on their plate, so they do more.

Help your child build their confidence using cutlery by steadily increasing the resistance/toughness of the food they are cutting. You can build up from soft foods like bananas and mashed potatoes to cutting putty or a piece of meat, like a sausage.

You can also encourage them by asking them to help you cut up foods when preparing meals or making a pizza.

Supervise your child at all times when using knives, and they should not use sharp knives before they are developmentally ready.



### Helpful tools & equipment

- **Non-slip or anti-slip mats** - It's harder to learn if the plate is sliding around. You can use a non-slip surface or mat to help stop the plate from moving.
- **Easy grip or ergonomic cutlery** - These are designed to be easier to use. They are designed with thicker handles to make it easier for children to hold. Some easy grip cutlery will have reminders for where your child can place their fingers.
- **Plate guards** - If your child is older and finding it hard to scoop using a spoon or fork, a plate guard can be used. Alternatively, you can try using plates or bowls with higher sides to make this easier.
- Start with plastic children's utensils, before moving onto metal utensils.

